DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 469 CS 205 366

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TITLE Black Literature Course: 1973 vs. 1978.
PUB DATE Sep 78
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York State English Council (28th, Rochester, NY, September 21-23, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Culture; *Black Literature; *Course Content; *Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Evaluation; Curriculum Research; Educational Trends; *English Curriculum; Higher Education; *Teacher Education; Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

Surveys in 1972 and 1977 of colleges and universities in New York state were used to judge advances and declines in black literature course offerings, course enrollment, course content, and instructor preparation. In 1972, 76 of the responding registrars said that their schools were offering black literature courses, while only 36 registrars made such a claim in the 1977 survey. When the instructors of the courses were polled, the average class sizes of the black literature courses were found to be 24.6 in 1972 and 23.1 in 1977, indicating that interest in black literature had not decreased sufficiently to warrant dropping such courses from the curriculum. Both surveys showed that Richard Wright was the author most frequently taught, and that Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were the authors considered to have the greatest literary merit. More diversity was evident in the course reading lists for 1977 than for 1972. More instructors in the 1977 survey had received formal instruction in teaching black history and culture, while more instructors in 1972 had prepared themselves to teach the course. It appears that the instructors who teach black literature now are being better prepared to discuss a wider range of material, but that more black literature courses should be developed. (RL)

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BLACK LITERATURE COURSE: 1973 vs. 1978

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BLACK LITERATURE COURSE: 1972 vs. 1977

The August, 1978 issue of Ebony, devoted to an exploration of "The New Generation," contained an article by Alex Poinsett entitled "Education and The New Generation." The article contained the following statement:

> By the mid 1970's the Black Studies crusade, which had launched academic programs on about 500 of the nation's 3,000 colleges and universities, gradually fizzled out as white college administrators quietly reneged on solemn commitments made to Black students in the heat of battle.

Similar statements have appeared in a variety of newspapers and magazines since the mid 70's.

This paper is a report and a comparison of two investigations of Black Literature courses taught in some of the colleges and universities of New York State during two different academic years. The first investigation was conducted in the academic year 1972-73, shortly after the innovation of Black Studies courses across the nation. The second investigation was carried out during the 1977-78 academic year. In this paper such topics as course offerings, course enrollment, course content and instructor preparation will be discussed.

For both investigations an HEW list of institutions of higher learning in New York State was used as a base point for contact.

Both times the registrars of the institutions appearing on this list were contacted and asked:

a. If they offered a Black Literature course during the academic year under consideration.

b. If they did offer such a course to furnish the name(s) of the instructor(s) of such courses.

In 1972, 74.1 percent of the registrars contacted responded and in 1977, 64.7 percent responded. Of those responding 41 percent in 1972 and 30.1 percent in 1977 said a Black Literature course was being offered during the academic year involved. Perhaps the most interesting statistic here is that in 1972, 76 of the responding registrars said a Black Literature course was being offered at this institution whereas in 1977 only 36 made such a claim. However we look at the figures, and allowing for variations in institutions responding, there has almost certainly been a decline between 1972 and 1977 in the number of Black Literature courses offered in New York State's colleges and universities.

Next the instructors whose names were furnished by the registrars were contacted and asked to fill out a questionnaire. In 1972, 32.8 percent and in 1977, 52.9 percent of the instructors contacted filled out questionnaires. In spite of the fact that the total number of instructors participating in 1977 was lower than in 1972 (25 vs. 19), instructor cooperation was considerably higher in 1977. In 1972 the average class size of the Black Literature courses of participating instructors was 24.6 and in 1977 it was 23.1. This statistic certainly does not indicate that interest in

Black Literature courses has decreased sufficiently to warrant dropping such courses from the curriculum. It would be interesting to compare the enrollment figures of Black Literature courses with those of some of the more traditionally oriented literature courses which are often retained as a matter of course.

Participating instructors were asked a series of questions to determine the status of Black Literature courses on their campuses. In both 1972 and 1977 only one institution reported that the Black Literature course was a required course, and in both years all of the courses were undergraduate, elective and offered for credit. In 1972 two of the courses and in 1977 three of the courses were offered by Black Studies departments; most of the others emanated from English departments.

Course content was also examined in both surveys. In both years Black American writers were taught far more frequently than Black writers of any other nationality. In 1972 only 20 percent and in 1977 only 17.6 percent of participating instructors taught any non-American Black Literature. In both 1972 and 1977 instructors favored selections written by 20th Century Black American writers. In 1972, 52.3 percent and in 1977, 52.9 percent of the instructors said that over 75 percent of the selections read for their courses were written by 20th Century Black American writers. In both investigations the most frequently taught author was Richard Wright, but his popularity declined considerably between 1972 and 1977. In 1972 he was taught by 80 percent of participating instructors

and in 1977 he was taught by only 64.1 percent. In 1972 Wright was followed, not too closely, by Le Roi Jones 52 percent, Ralph Ellison 48 percent, and James Baldwin and Jean Toomer each 40 percent. In 1977 Wright was followed by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes each taught by 40.6 percent of participating instructors. While the frontrunners have not changed much between 1972 and 1977, the extent of their popularity has decreased. A comparison of the required reading lists of Black Literature courses in 1972 and 1977 shows a much greater diversity of authors and selections taught in 1977. There has been a definite shift from the "tried and true" and a move to include the works of lesser known literary figures from the past as well as the present. Part of this diversity may well be due to the influence of the Black Arts Movement. In 1972 many instructors reached for authors whose reputations had been well established before the innovation of Black Studies courses and they avoided experimentation and innovation in their choice of reading materials. Today, many instructors appear to be veering away from building courses mainly and/or only around well known authors.

In both 1972 and 1977 the two authors considered by instructors as having the greatest literary merit were Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. In 1972 Wright placed first with 48 percent and Ellison second, 44 percent. In 1977 the positions were reversed; Ellison was first with 51.7 percent and Wright second with 46.4

percent. Interestingly, Baldwin (though taught frequently) dropped in ranking of literary merit from third place in 1972 with 32 percent to fourth place with 17 percent in 1977, and he was preceded by Hughes and Chesnutt.

When Black Studies courses were first innovated, much controversy centered around the question of who should teach such courses. Many felt that since very few instructors had specialized in Black history and culture, hardly anyone was available who was qualified to teach such courses. But the courses commenced and many questioned the quality of instructor preparation. In 1972 only 28 percent of participating instructors had earned any academic credits in Black Literature and 56 percent had prepared themselves to teach their Black Literature courses exclusively through independent study. By 1977 this picture had changed considerably; 50.7 percent of participating instructors had earned some credits in Black Literature and the number who prepared themselves exclusively through independent study had dropped to 46.4 percent.

Often discussions of literature involve non-literary material and instructors were asked to rate their acquaintance with non-literary Black culture (i.e. music, art, folk heroes, politicians, etc.). In 1972 only 16 percent of participating instructors rated themselves as excellent in this area; in 1977 this number rose to 40.8 percent. In 1972, 8 percent of the instructors felt

that their acquaintance with Black culture was poor; none felt this to be the case in 1977. It is evident that many of the instructors currently involved in teaching Black Literature courses have better academic credentials and a broader general knowledge of Black culture than did the instructors in 1972.

When Black Literature courses first originated and yet today, a number of people questioned and still question, the existence of such an entity as a "Black Literature Course." They argue that the works of Black writers should be included in traditional literature courses rather than being presented separately. In this investigator's opinion, there are three major arguments against such a viewpoint. First, Black writers have not been included to any great extent in traditional literature courses. Neither in 1972 nor in 1977 did any of the participating instructors feel that Black writers had been satisfactorily included in traditional literature courses. Secondly, instructors of traditional literature courses are probably not very well qualified to teach Black writers. When one considers that less than half of the participating instructors in 1977 had earned any credits in Black Literature, it seems reasonable to conjecture that instructors of traditional literature courses probably have even less formal academic preparation in Black Literature and probably less motivation to engage in independent study. Thirdly, Black American Literature (as well as non-American Black Literature) is rooted in its own literary and cultural tradition. Black

American Literature has some of its roots in the oral tradition brought from Africa and continued during the days of slavery when most slaves could neither read nor write. Black American Literature was born of a pain and suffering unknown to most Americans of other ethnic backgrounds and this pain and suffering has been reflected in the works of Black writers. Black Literature courses are definitely fulfilling a need; they are closing an intellectual gap that must be closed.

When Roots first appeared on TV a Syracuse Herald Journal review included the following statement:

> Haley has also succeeded in confronting Americans with our history of slavery in a way never done before. At last one reads of real people who were real slaves. We are confronted too with the fact of the slave ownership of Presidents Washington and Jefferson, though few Americans have thought in the past of "Massa George Washington," as Haley's ancestors referred to him.

If we as readers are finally reading about "real people who were real slaves," it is our fault, not the fault of Black American writers. All through the 18th Century and the first half of the 19th Century, exslaves eloquently, and often with literary skill and expertise, told of their experiences as slaves. If these were not "real people who were real slaves," we shall never find any. A contributing factor to this ignorance of the Black past may be the extensive focus on 20th Century Black American writers in the courses examined. More emphasis must be placed on lesser known writers, especially on pre-20th Century writers, or the myth will continue that Black American writers have only made significant

literary contributions in the 20th Century. The 1977 survey indicated that a number of instructors are working to destroy this myth, but more must become involved.

To cease the presentation of Black Literature courses might well be to revert to the pattern of literature instruction prior to the mid 1960's when Black writers were infrequently taught. If these courses diminish, we can be fairly certain that most traditional courses will include only the best known and most widely accepted 20th Century Black authors (if they do even that).

To assure the widespread dissemination of Black Literature the following steps should be seriously considered:

1. All colleges in New York State should be urged to include courses in Black Literature open to all students, but held as a requirement for all undergraduate English majors.

2. New York State Certification of English teachers at the secondary level should require at least one course in Black Literature.

3. In service training (workshops and/or seminars) in the area of Black Literature should be made available to high school and college teachers of English who have had no previous courses in Black Literature.

4. Teachers of English and textbook selection committees should be active in urging textbook publishers to include the works of Black writers in literature anthologies.

5. Librarians should actively promote the inclusion and circulation of the works of Black authors in school and public libraries.

Only if those interested in the continuation of Black Literature courses take action to insure their survival, will the next five years--1977 to 1982--see a halt to the reduction of such courses in the colleges and universities of New York State which we saw between 1972 and 1977.